

The Role of Women in *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua [Achebe](#)'s *Things Fall Apart* portrays Africa, particularly the Ibo society, right before the arrival of the white man. *Things Fall Apart* **analyzes** the destruction of African **culture** by the appearance of the white man in terms of the destruction of the **bonds** between **individuals** and their society. Achebe, who teaches us a great deal about Ibo society and translates Ibo myth and proverbs, also explains the **role** of women in pre-colonial Africa.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the reader follows the trials and tribulations of Okonkwo, a tragic hero whose tragic flaw includes the fact that "his whole life was **dominated** by fear, the fear of failure and weakness." (16) For Okonkwo, his father Unoka embodied the epitome of failure and weakness. Okonkwo was taunted as a child by other children when they called Unoka agbala. Agbala could either mean a man who had taken no title or "woman." Okonkwo hated anything weak or frail, and his descriptions of his tribe and the members of his family show that in Ibo society anything strong was likened to man and anything weak to woman. Because Nwoye, his son by his first wife, reminds Okonkwo of his father Unoka he describes him as woman-like. After hearing of Nwoye's **conversion** to Christianity, Okonkwo ponders how he, "a flaming fire could have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate" (143)? On the other hand, his daughter Ezinma "should have been a boy." (61) He favored her the most out of all of his children, yet "if Ezinma had been a boy [he] would have been happier." (63) After killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo, who cannot understand why he is so distraught, asks himself, "When did you become a shivering old woman?" (62) When his fellows look as if they are not going to fight against the intruding missionaries, Okonkwo remembers the "days when men were men." (184)

In keeping with the Ibo view of female nature, they allowed wife beating. The novel describes two **instances** when Okonkwo beats his second wife, once when she did not come home to make his meal. He beat her severely and was punished but only because he beat her during the Week of Peace. He beat her again when she referred to him as one of those "guns that never shot." When a severe case of wife beating comes before the egwugwu, he found in favor of the wife, but at the end of the trial a man wondered, "Why such a trifle should come before the egwugwu." (89)

Achebe shows that the Ibo **nonetheless assign** important **roles** to women. For **instance**, women painted the houses of the egwugwu (84). **Furthermore**, the first wife of a man in the Ibo society is paid some respect. This deference is **illustrated** by the palm wine ceremony at Nwakibie's obi. Anasi, Nwakibie's first wife, had not yet arrived and "the others [other wives] could not drink before her" (22). The importance of woman's **role** appears when Okonkwo is exiled to his motherland. His uncle, Uchendu, noticing Okonkwo's distress, eloquently explains how Okonkwo should view his exile: "A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland." A man has both joy and sorrow in his life and when the bad times come his "mother" is always there to comfort him. Thus comes the saying "Mother is Supreme".

Source: <http://www.usp.nus.edu.sg/post/nigeria/women.html>

Numbers in parentheses (#) refer to page numbers. Depending on your copy of the book, these may not match your version of the book.

NOTE: The words in bold are from the AWL.